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ABILITIES by Lynn Zaritsky
PUTTING ABILITIES TO WORK

Jim Aycock rocks. Literally. Sometimes he rocks by pacing the floor quickly, and sometimes he rocks when he sits. He likes to rock but because it's not always socially acceptable, his sister, my friend and neighbor, Alyson, reminds him not to.

Aycock has autism. He does not speak unless spoken to (and sometimes not even then), rarely looks anyone in the eye, could care less what he wears and hardly ever smiles. He also taught himself mathematical logarithms at the age of 4, plays Chopin on the piano and constructs 1,000-piece puzzles in record time, even when the pieces are still upside-down.

Early intervention did not exist when Aycock, now 49, was a child. But his potential was not lost on his parents, who enrolled him in public school. He excelled in math and music, flunked driver's education and physical education classes, and became fluent in Spanish.

As is typical of people with autism, Aycock, when tested, has exotic "peaks" and extreme "troughs" of learning. Aycock's peaks are sufficient for him to be called "savant," like the character Dustin Hoffman played in the movie, "Rain Man"; simultaneously, his troughs are sufficient for him to be considered to have a "severe" disability.

Also typical of autism is Aycock's inability to grasp nuances. Words are interpreted literally, so "wash under your arms" becomes "washing the underside of the forearm." Testing shows him to be in the 98th percentile in decoding written English, which means he can pronounce the written word very accurately. But he is in the second percentile in reading comprehension, which means he has no idea what the literature he can read so well means.

Perhaps it is in search of meaning that people with autism so often resort to ritualized, patterned behavior: Shredded Wheat every morning for breakfast; only white cotton T-shirts; only this route to a friend's house; toys on the floor, lined up like soldiers or organized by color.

When the time came for Aycock to become employed, his parents did something unusual for that era. They did not listen to the "experts," who deemed him capable only of a sheltered workshop, mindlessly coiling telephone cords around his arms for pennies a day. They got proactive instead.

It just so happened that another parent of a child with autism was also the general manager of the local transit authority. Understanding autism from this unique perspective, he offered to help carve a job for Aycock at the main offices of the transit authority. The plan was not only to use Aycock's talents, but to also translate what could be perceived as the negative traits of autism into positive job skills. Since Aycock likes to pace, it became his job to deliver the interdepartmental mail, four times a day. It had never before been accomplished with such speed.

Since Aycock needed ritual and repetition and loved numbers, early on he was taught to do the invoices and daily work sheets. His speed and accuracy earned him the moniker, "The Human Computer." Later Aycock was instructed in data entry on the computer.

Into his 20th year with the transit authority, Aycock now spends part of his day in the money room, rapidly counting the change from the bus tills. "He's one of the best and the fastest," said his supervisor. "He loves the money room and doing the mail runs most of all," she said.

He likes filing least of all, which pretty much puts him on the planet with everyone else. After all, there is usually at least one hated thing about every job. And being on the planet with everyone else is what it's all about. Aycock receives competitive wages for a job well done, with benefits, just like the next guy. "When Jim's not here, we really miss him," said his supervisor. "His work for the company is invaluable."

Like I said, Jim Aycock rocks. This time, figuratively.

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